THE NEW SCHOOL
FILM SERIES 33: Program #24
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ARCHIVE NIGHT

BEHIND THAT CURTAIN (Fox, 1929) Directed by Irving Cummings; screenplay by Sonya Levien and Clarke Silvernail from the story by Earl Derr Biggers originally serialized in The Saturday Evening Post in March-May of 1928; Camera, Conrad Wells; Dave Ragain and Vincent Farrow; (also released in silent version) 82 mins. With: Anna Q. Nilsson, Lois Moran, Billy and Elmer, Gladys King, Boris Karloff, Pauline Curtis, Jamiel Hassen, Peter Gawthorne, John Bogart, Montague Shaw, Finch Smiles, Mercedes De Valasco, and E.L. Park as Charlie Chan.

Considering the success of Paul Leni's earlier Charlie Chan film "The Chinese Parrot", and the attention drawn to Sojin's Chan performance in that film, it's odd that Fox should have chosen not only to rewrite this particular Biggers novel, but to virtually write Chan out of it. Its establishing material and the initial murder are faithful to the original story, as is the later switch to a San Francisco locale, but little else is retained. The time span of the original (16 years) is drastically reduced, and the emphasis shifted from Chan's deduction to the flight of the innocent man. True, Chan is occasionally referred to in reverential tones, and it is he who produces the key evidence near the end, but the awkward and self-conscious performance by E.L. Park (Chan #3), and the weakest of them all) does nothing to build his scene into the highlight it should be. For the rest, the film is quite typical of the hybrid early talkie that was also designed for silent release. Many from this period were far worse, just as many were substantially better, but few were quite so unmeasured in their pacing. Characters speak slowly and distinctly, their words are absorbed and mumbled over, and back come the replies in equally measured tempo. The varied locations do provide for a certain amount of exploitation of local sound effects and dialogue. The plot is an interesting one, too, and the cast full of worthwhile if rather hesitant performers. Paradoxically, one of its greatest assets is also one of its major disappointments. Lois Moran was (and is, in this film) a gorgeous creature almost approaching the movie-goddess status of her goddesses. She didn't speak, and if they do design to do so, they particularly shouldn't speak in a badly-written w revival of all their frailties and weaknesses. There's nothing particularly wrong with Lois Moran's voice, and later she learned to use it rather better, but somehow it is here quite at odds with the visual image she projects. Every time she opens her mouth she tumbles from the pedestal on which both we and the script have placed her, and becomes almost like a Buster Keaton heroine, unworthy of all the care and respect that were originally intended for her. Mentally, physically, and emotionally, sophistication and dormant passion suggests that she might have made an ideal heroine for Alfred Hitchcock, and it's a pity that their paths never crossed during her early sound period.

LORNA DOONE (Associated Talking Pictures (Ealing) 1934) Directed by Basil Deen; screenplay by Dorothy Farnon and Gordon Wellesley from the novel by R.B. Blackmore; additional dialogue, Miles Malleson; Camera, Robert Martin; Art director, Edward Carrick; Music, C. Armstrong Gibbs; Lorna's Love Song by Rutland Boughton; Musical direction, Ernest Irving; 90 mins.


Surprisingly, "Lorna Doone" was never released in this country nor even picked up for a later TV package. One would have thought that even in 1934 its strong action content would have made it far more suitable for U.S. release than the majority of very ordinary British films which were, for some mysterious reason, bought for this country, while later on its roster of increasingly important names would likewise have justified U.S. exposure. Far lesser British films, such as "Midshipman Easy", were imported on that pretext, but such was not the case, and thus tonight's "Lorna Doone" represents a public U.S. première some 45 years belatedly. Incidentally, a later British reissue boosted Margaret Lockwood (initially fourth in the cast) to star billing, with a title card all to herself. That title card was then removed from a still later reissue, with the result that her name does not appear at all in the credits of this print!

The Doones were Britain's Daltons and Jesse James gang all rolled into one, circa early 1600's. But since they were rascals pure and simple, their outlawry a matter of choice and disposition, not forced on them by banks or railroads, they have never acquired a very dominant spot in British folklore. Their part of England, and especially the Doone Valley, has become somewhat of a tourist centre, but they take a very secondary place to Robin Hood in terms of romantic legend.

The novel "Lorna Doone" almost a rival to "The Last of the Mohicans" in its blend of historical fact - nearly long ago and a popular British classic, and no movie has yet done it justice. It's a novel in which nothing is done by halves, and apart from pre-dating Edna Ferber in its time-span, it also resembles the sagas of Selma Lagerlof in both its scope and its use of landscape. In the book for example, much is made of the hero's almost superhuman strength, and it is constantly being tested. He reaches the Doone territory in the novel by a hazardous climb up a waterfall. (Most films had him diving down, although presumably meant that he had to climb up on his way home). The escape from the Doone village is done, in
the novel, during a blizzard and across a frozen lake - a sequence of Griffith proportions. In Ealing's version, the snow is there - and the gimmick of the hero fashioning a ski is retained - but the potential is otherwise undisguised. Also, every film version uses the shooting of Lorna at the end as merely an incident and motivation for the final chase and fight. In the novel, at least a chapter is devoted to whether or not Lorna will survive, with great detail on the medical treatment, bleeding by leeches, and so forth.

"Lorna Doone" has been filmed three times each in this country and Britain. In the USA, it was done by Biograph as a 2-reeler in 1915, by Maurice Tourneur in 1922 (the best version, though still with many shortcomings) and again in the 1950's, in Technicolor, with Richard Greene and Barbara Hale - this latter little more than a standard smashbuckler. In Britain it was done first in 1912, Britain's first 5-reel feature, remade in 1920 - surprisingly still only at 5 reels and of course tonight's version of 1934, made by the forerunner of Ealing Studios, for ATV, then a relatively small company, it's a most creditable and surprisingly ambitious production. Ealing had little or no expertise in action material, or films of this size, at that time, and Basil Dean (married to the star, Victoria Hopper), was at his best in musicals at this stage, not this kind of gutty fare. Individual action scenes, especially the climactic chase and fight, are quite well done, but the big mass action scenes, such as the Doones' attack on the farmers, tend to be somewhat confused, very much in the manner of Griffith's "Judith of Bethulia". Often we just don't know what's happening, or which side is winning, until the dialogue tells us. That it often looks like a Western, complete with serial-like superimposed titles, agitato music and running inserts in the chase, is probably due to the influence of the Tourneur version, which itself looks from an inner western. It's known that cameraman Robert Martin saw and studied the Tourneur film. Often it copies the pictorial style very closely, though such copying is largely limited to linking or transitional shots (silhouettes of the Doones riding at night) suggesting that Martin may have been given some leeway to shoot 2nd-unit material.

Pictorially it works rather better than it does dramatically, since Edward Garrick's art direction is thoughtfully done too. Somehow the actors - or at least, those playing farmers - don't always seem able to cope with the colloquial English of the period, sounding stilted. Quite incidentally the film makes an interesting comparison with Kevin Brownlow's remarkable "Winston Churchill" in the same period. With far less money, Brownlow is able to recapture the feeling and the look of the period rather better - and his non-actors seem much more at home with the difficult form of the dialogue. All things considered though, this "Lorna Doone", despite production shortcomings at times, is a fascinating and worthwhile production. I saw it initially in 1934 and remembered it vividly; indeed, it was the musicalism that stayed with me. It is referenced in detail. I had no chance to see it again until the acquisition of this print last year, and it is surprising how strongly many of the images registered. (Already, images from many of this year's crop of films are beginning to grow hazy!)

One minor mystery is solved with the rediscovery of this film. For years, Jack Hawkins always insisted that this was one of his films. Yet the many quite extensive casts never included him, reviews never mentioned him, and people who had seen the film years back could not remember him. He is in the film and even has a closeup and some dialogue with that unique voice quite recognizable. But he appears loaded down with costume, plumes and a beard, in a low-key-lit interior scene where he is in constant motion! He is the Doone who attacks Lorna at the mid-way point, whereas he and another Doone are bested by John Leder in a fight. From his costume, he would appear to be well up in the Doone hierarchy and not merely a "bit" henchman. One must assume therefore that his part was originally much larger, but was trimmed out but for this one sequence, which clearly could not be cut. He had already made several films prior to this, was an established if not yet very important actor, and certainly would not have played the role if it consisted of no more than this one sequence it now has.

The supporting cast is particularly strong on established character names, and altogether it's a most interesting film to be able to introduce close to half-a-century after its production. In many ways, it is a much more enterprising version of an ambitious literary work by a small company than was, for example, Monogram's contemporary onslaught on Bronte ("Jane Eyre") and Dickens ("Oliver Twist").

William K. Everson

Program Ends: 10:40 There will be a brief discussion period following the screening. Summer schedules are available this evening.